

GL Assessment is an independent provider of educational assessments and has relationships with over 85% of UK primary and secondary schools. The company specialises in literacy, numeracy, reasoning and SEN assessments. Tests are nationally standardised, giving measures such as National Curriculum levels and standard age scores. In-depth interpretation services help to identify appropriate intervention strategies.

In 2010, in partnership with The Centre for Reading and Language at the University of York, GL Assessment developed and standardised a new test of reading comprehension for secondary school pupils. The *York Assessment of Reading for Comprehension Secondary Test* (YARC Secondary) found great variability in the reading skills of pupils between Years 7 and 11.

The assessment comprises (1) an extended version of the Single Word Reading Test (SWRT), (2) the Passage Reading test and (3) the Reading Fluency test. YARC is designed for use by teachers, psychologists and other education professionals and can be used to identify reading problems, assess and monitor student progress, provide diagnostic information, and assess eligibility for access arrangements.

How common is weak literacy?

Following analysis of word recognition (decoding) and language comprehension abilities of 857 11-to-16-year-old pupils at state-funded secondary schools in England, YARC found that weak literacy, though not prevalent, was evident in a number of pupils. Within each year group, pupils were identified with a reading age of 6 or 7 years old, hence demonstrating a reading ability below their chronological age. However, only 46% of pupils with significant decoding problems were known to their schools to require additional support, as indicated by the SEN Register. These figures are despite an increase in SEN recording and changes to literacy teaching, suggesting that pupils are still slipping through the net.

Within each year group, from Year 7 to Year 11, the study found great variability in reading skills with age equivalents for performance on the test ranging from 6 or 7 to 16 years and over. For example:

- Year 7 pupils with a reading age below 10 years old represented 19.1% of the sample
- Year 11 pupils with a reading age lower than 14 years represented 33.7% of the sample
- The weakest decoding scores (categorised as extremely low) accounted for 3.7% of the sample

Given the proportion of pupils with reading abilities below their chronological age, the test scores were considered alongside the SEN Register to check whether the correct proportion of pupils with reading difficulties had been identified by the schools.

- In Year 7, 46.7% of poor decoders and 57.9% of pupils with reading comprehension difficulties were not identified on the school SEN Register
- In Year 11, 53.8% of poor decoders and 76.5% of pupils with reading comprehension difficulties were not identified on the school SEN Register

These figures suggest that there is considerable unmet need with regard to literacy problems in secondary schools. Specifically, only 46% of children with decoding difficulties and 44% of children with comprehension difficulties are known to their schools, despite the fact that registration of pupils with reading difficulties on the SEN Register increased from 18.4% in 2007 to 21% in 2009.

What anomalies and barriers do you see within literacy policy and teaching?

The barriers that inhibit literacy are a complex interaction of factors that touch both on the environment in which learning takes place and the way in which reading is managed within the wider secondary school framework.

The fact that literacy (though intrinsic to an ability to access the curriculum) is not an overt secondary education subject, means it is not formally monitored or taught. Consequently, pupils' literacy is neither officially assessed at the start of Year 7 nor at intervals throughout their secondary education. The absence of a literacy test upon entry into Year 7 combined with the absence of robust data on the reading abilities of all pupils impedes understanding of their literacy needs.

A further barrier to literacy concerns teacher training. Selection of the best intervention is dependent upon a sound understanding of assessment results and what they demonstrate about a pupil's reading capacity. Interventions that are not suited to the literacy difficulty in question will fall short of helping the pupil to achieve their potential. It would be beneficial to give teachers more comprehensive training in assessment administration and subsequent intervention selection to maximise successful interventions.

What approaches and recommendations can you suggest for improving literacy?

GL Assessment advises the following recommendations:

1. School policy should emphasise that all teachers are responsible for pupil literacy

Since literacy difficulties can develop at any time during a child's education, all teachers need to monitor and be aware of literacy standards to prevent any pupil from slipping through the net. The earlier the identification takes place, the more successful the interventions are likely to be. Literacy assessment upon entry into Year 7 is important since the extra burden that transition to secondary school places on pupils can provoke new problems or exacerbate minor ones.

2. School management should record robust data on their pupil's literacy rates

The initiation of regular reading assessments and subsequent test scores should facilitate the collation of robust information regarding literacy needs. If a school is encouraged to record such information it will improve their understanding of pupil's literacy needs which in turn, should bolster their efforts at improving identification and intervention.

3. Improve teaching training of assessments so that teachers have the best information

It is vital that assessments and interventions are tailored to the specific needs of pupils. If the assessment is correctly administered, analysed and its results properly understood, this will enable teachers to select the right intervention. Since all teachers are responsible for SEN and literacy, they need to be able to identify potential literacy difficulties. Ensuring teachers are well trained to identify and overcome a range of barriers to learning should increase early identification and raise literacy standards.